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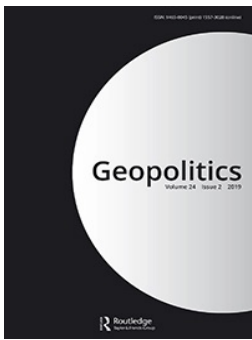
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# Ephemera(I) Geopolitics: The Material Cultures of British Military Recruitment

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores contemporary cultures of British military recruitment and considers the domestication of geopolitics as matters of the ephemeral (fleeting, sensory encounters), and of ephemera (everyday objects). It employs an auto/ethnographic approach toward spaces critical to recruitment – the airshow, the home and the body. Three central contributions are developed: first, building on a recent turn to the material in political geography, the paper argues that taking seriously materiality, objects, and ‘stuff’ enhances our understanding of the connections between geopolitical, militarised and everyday; second, deploying a notion of the geopolitical social, it explores the geopolitical as it is situated in everyday lives and spaces; third, it investigates the tendency for militarised objects to find their way onto and around bodies and into domestic spaces. Set at the interface of literatures in critical geopolitics and critical military studies, the paper concludes that material encounters and everyday objects are matters central to the business of geopolitics and militarism.

## Introduction

Contemporary military recruitment in the UK is a multi-million-pound industry and involves the tendering of highly profitable public-sector contracts to some of the country’s largest advertising agencies. The recent *This Is Belonging* British Army campaign, for example, has seen the roll out of an integrated, multi-platform campaign targeted at television, radio, and online digital spaces (principally Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn). Based on an analysis of social data gleaned from ‘previous successful applicants’, the *This Is Belonging* campaign has leveraged a data-driven approach to craft a “conversion-led, mobile-first digital hub where potential recruits [can] take bespoke paths depending on their interests” (Karmarama 2017: n.p). Like most contemporary recruiting campaigns in the UK, however, *This is Belonging* also includes ‘nationwide outdoor and experiential activities’ (Gwynn 2017) which consist of a host of military presences in everyday

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spaces. These might include an armoured vehicle parked on a city street, for example, flanked by *Belonging*-branded banners and military personnel handing out recruiting flyers. A mobile climbing wall might be set up in a similar fashion as a focal point for a recruiting drive in a suburban park (the activity of climbing being frequently used by the military as opportunity to embody the determination and fearlessness required by those who serve). The experiential aspects of a campaign such as this might also be seen at a range of the UK's military-themed events like airshows, or at increasingly common civic occasions like Armed Forces Day.

Much progress has been made in geography and cognate disciplines and in wider public discourse on critiques of military recruitment. On the recent *Belonging* campaign specifically, Walker (2017) questions the disparity between the image presented in recruitment and the reality of military service. This disparity, and wider criticisms of the deceptiveness of recruitment is increasingly targeted by activist organisations (Forces Watch 2018), and by artists like Darren Cullen (Cullen 2017). The efforts of geographers in understanding military recruitment have focussed on the print and moving image, and have explored the violent visions and spatial metaphors integral to the imagined worlds presented by recruiters and their respective advertising agencies both historically and in recent campaigns (Rech 2014). What might seem a matter primarily for popular geopolitics, considering its existence as/in popular culture, recruitment has also begun to interest social and feminist geographers with an interest in the militarisation of children and young people's lives (Hörschelmann 2016; Rech 2016). And importantly for this paper, scholars have also begun to interrogate the lived, experiential geographies of recruitment both in the UK (Rech 2015) and US (Allen 2009; Lewis 2009).

Despite this span of work and an engagement with an increasing range of persuasive and militarised media and spaces, very little has been done to explore the material cultures of military recruitment, or recruitment as a series of sensory, haptic and embodied practices. The need for this sort of inquiry is demonstrated, much as with the opening example, by the rapidly diversifying nature of military-public relations and promotion, and similarly, a marked turn to experiential marketing. As the UK's Ministry of Defence has begun to outsource much of its communications and promotional work, state-contracted advertising agencies have begun to push military recruiting beyond 'traditional' formats (print, cinema, TV and radio), such that multi-platform campaigns are now targeted across traditional and digital media, at events and in a variety public spaces. With this, there has been a proliferation of the 'thing-ness' and ephemerality of recruitment and public relations: the usual collection of persuasive objects and practices – glossy careers pamphlets, posters – are now accompanied by free pens, lanyards, keyrings, stickers etc. which are given out free at a host of events on sea fronts, school and university campuses, and city streets. Such events also host a range of

physical activities; a branch of the Army may attract passers-by on a city street with a shooting gallery-type experience, or the Air Force a simulator to engage a crowd at a country fair. A study of military recruitment is therefore an opportunity to make critical connections between contemporary material cultures and state-sanctioned geopolitical scripts. Such scripts are a matter of and for critical geopolitics where military recruitment deploys particular imaginaries of people and place. But it also of importance where they are designed to provide material sustenance to armed forces (in the way of prospective recruits).

A critique of the material cultures of militarism is also supported by a recent turn to the material in political geography and critical IR, which at least in critical geopolitics can be traced to Thrift's (2000) contention that this sub-field should pay attention to a variety of 'little things' that sustain geopolitical discourse. In taking seriously the 'thing-ness' of geopolitics and militarism, and contributing to what might be called the 'political geographies of the object' (Meehan, Shaw, and Marston 2013), this paper will consider the material cultures of British military recruitment in two ways. Firstly, recruitment will be considered as *ephemeral*, and as about fleeting and sometimes unpredictable encounters between bodies and objects. Secondly, it will consider recruitment as about *ephemera*, interrogating a range of exceptional and/or mundane objects and how the 'stuff' of recruitment comes to matter in everyday life. By considering these two registers of materiality, connections are sought between the 'big' and 'little' of geopolitics and militarism; between public and domestic spaces, between imaginations, objects and bodies. It is where these various phenomenon and spaces intersect that the geopolitical is domesticated, and where the domestic becomes a matter of/for geopolitics. Before detailing how, exactly, the material cultures of military recruitment do come to matter in these ways, the paper turns first to briefly review the literatures which establish a connection the geopolitical, material and militarised.

### **Material Cultures, Geopolitics and Militarism**

Following Thrift's (2000) oft-noted challenge to critical geopolitics, a number of authors have begun to pursue the implications of an object-centred or material geopolitics. Signalling the wider sensory or ephemeral nature of visual culture, for example, MacDonald, Hughes, and Dodds (2010) point to the much-more-than-visual experience of geopolitics. Depledge (2015, 91), differently, argues for assemblage-thinking and an attention to "seemingly inert materials that, through their very inertness, can both strengthen and weaken... geopower" (see also MacLennan 2016). Inert objects like texts, books and hard-drives might, according to Müller (2013), serve as good starting points with which to interrogate the socio-materiality of geopolitical discourse. Perhaps

the clearest invocation of material geopolitics, though, exists in the work of Meehan et al. (2013; 2014), who offer a profound argument for a political geography of the object. Meehan et al.'s wider thesis will be explored below in an empirical discussion of military recruitment, but at this juncture the relevance of their particular contribution. First, they argue that political geography might seek to locate power "in the hustle and bustle of objects themselves" (Meehan, Shaw, and Marston 2013, 8), and second, that "there is not a world that first exists and is then populated by objects: worlds are built on the backs of objects" (Meehan, Shaw, and Marston 2013, 3). Thus, at least within the confines of political geography, a turn away from discourse has been matched by a turn toward objects, power and place

Where a political geography of objects might come to matter in critical geopolitical scholarship is open to question and might be taken in many productive directions. In this paper, however, an object-oriented political geography is one which pursues questions of militarism and militarisation. There is wide precedent for scholarship around these themes in the field (see Farish 2013), particularly in relation to popular culture (Dalby 2008). Objects and materiality have also featured in such work as they relate to wider questions of the geographies of violence (Katz 2007). A crucial step toward a material geopolitics of militarism exists where political geography has therefore begun to ground its critiques of war, violence and militarisation in everyday life, and thus where it has also begun to share an approach with other disciplines (particularly IR, anthropology and the multi-disciplinary Critical Military Studies). The work of Christine Sylvester (Sylvester 2013, 617) for instance, in mirroring similar calls in feminist geopolitics, suggests that despite IR's instance that it knows war, it is nevertheless "historically disinterested in probing the vast expanse of war's ordinary". In sociology, too, McSorley and Maltby (2012) challenge staid frames of reference in the social sciences, and hope to highlight war as a "broad array of fundamentally embodied practices, regimes and experiences" (McSorley 2014, 107).

Where the shared priorities of scholars interested in material culture, geopolitics and militarism arguably best come together is in Critical Military Studies (CMS) (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015; Rech et al. 2015). Though the remit of the multi-disciplinary effort of CMS is still being explored, it reflects many of the same aspirations of critical geopolitics. Namely, as Basham (2016b, 261) notes, it considers war as not just produced by (or a product of) a macro geopolitical practice, but rather also the "enactments and negotiations of militarism and violence in everyday life". Like critical geopolitics, CMS is about much more, conceptually, than materiality and objects. Yet, scholarship associated with CMS offers a valuable insight into how we might think about the connection between material cultures, geopolitics and militarism. Kevin McSorley (2016) for example, discusses the proliferation of military fitness initiatives in the UK and makes ready connections between the military body

ideal and the ephemera(l) of fitness. Speaking of ‘boot-camp’-style fitness classes, McSorley (2016, 113) neatly expresses the visceral nature of contemporary militarism, arguing that fitness has come to:

[Constitute] an emergent hybrid form of self-governance, a more volitional, embodied and transfigured auto-militarisation that is nonetheless fundamentally reliant upon an assemblage of other material, affects and bodies...[and is] being enacted within multiple and diffuse spaces of commercial leisure beyond the classic sites of military discipline and state authority and biopower.

A feature common to military materialities, as is implied here about military fitness, is conspicuous consumption and the insinuation of militarism into ‘mundane idioms’ (McSorley 2016) like the downloading of an app, or an act of remembrance or charitable giving. In work by Basham (2016a, 892) the ‘communities of feeling’ associated with the Royal British Legion’s Poppy appeal are shown to animate only certain visions of the geopolitical and practices of remembering, notably those which “forget the violence and bloodiness of...warfare”. Equally, however, the poppy is a material object the purchasing of which frequently ignites public debate in the UK about how (though not necessarily why) we remember the war dead. The poppy, of course, also points to a proliferation of other ephemera – yellow ‘support the troops’ ribbons or car decals (e.g. Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks 1995; Coy, Woehrle, and Maney 2008; Stahl 2009), Help For Heroes bracelets – which all imply a folding of militarism into everyday habits and routines.

In a final example, military-branded tea, condiments and other foodstuffs are the central focus of an account of ‘conscience capitalism’, consumption and the ‘nostalgic rehabilitation’ of the British military (Tidy 2015). In line with the aspirations of CMS, Tidy (2015, 10) is concerned to expose the imaginative construction of the military via, in this case, “nostalgic invocations of the past [and]...morally virtuous wars”. Specifically, she demonstrates how military charities leverage a market trend for nostalgic, war-time and vintage-styled foodstuffs, a portion of the sale of which go to Veteran’s charities. The sort of public engagement in military imaginaries implied by the purchase and consumption of military-themed food is, clearly, problematic. Indeed, as Tidy (2015, 10) suggests, negotiations of militarism are happening here by means of “apolitical, lifestyle discourse[s]”, and represent at best a “refusal to engage with the overt politics...of contemporary wars”.

A crucial implication of Tidy’s (2015) account for this paper is the ‘objectness’ of militarism and the everydayness of encounters with ephemera. As we’re told – at least in the case of Help for Heroes tea – the material cultures of militarism have the potential to literally “infuse regular routines” (Tidy 2015, 9) and to permeate the banal everyday spaces of the supermarket, kitchen, and dinner table. Yet, what is missing from this account, and from

the literature more widely, is an engagement with these routines and spaces, and with ephemera on its own terms. The ephemera of militarism, in Tidy's (2015) paper, are considered merely as discursive, 'exemplifying texts', rather than as objects which come to matter in varied ways. Though it is undoubtedly the case that contemporary British militarism has been shaped by various discursive moves (many of which have been written about in *Geopolitics*), exactly how discourses of militarism materialise and come to matter is scantily understood.

In addition to the academic literature, this paper takes inspiration from Object Lessons (2017), and will root militarism in the everyday experience and life of ephemera and the ephemeral.<sup>1</sup> With a view to wider debates at the intersection of cultural and political geography and CMS, it will speak to three interrelated points of debate. First, it will offer materiality as a means to enhance our understanding of the connection between geopolitics, militarism and the everyday. The matter of whether the militarism is always geopolitical, or the geopolitical always militarised should never be one accepted uncritically. This is a question in need of frequent reappraisal, not least because of the evolving nature of civil-military relations. For instance, since the publication of *The Report of Inquiry into National Recognition of our Armed Forces* (Davies, Clark, and Sharp 2008), there have been a raft of measures to re-enchant public discourse around the British military. This has been manifested as a number of initiatives such as a new *National Armed Forces Day* (instituted in 2009, which is often held in tandem with air displays and other spectacular fêtes), the roll-out of an 'Armed Forces Community Covenant', and a 'Military Ethos and Skills' programmes for schools. Thus, insofar as these initiatives imply changing everyday geographies of militarisation, their inherent materialities will be shown in this paper to animate familiar geopolitical scripts and to bring only certain imaginative worlds into being.

Second, the paper will inquire after attempts to understand the 'geopolitical social' (Cowen and Smith 2009). A focus on ephemera and the ephemeral is, unavoidably but consciously, an act of situating geopolitics and militarism amid an "assemblage of territory, economy and social forms" (Cowen and Smith 2009, 23). In turn, the paper will reflect on how a material approach to militarism speaks to a range of attempts to ground the geopolitical in lives and spaces usually absent from critical accounts of geopolitics. Lastly, the paper will engage with the theme of the domestication of geopolitics directly, not least by reflecting on the social geographies of geopolitics. Specifically, it investigates home-spaces as the target and terrain of military recruitment, and the power for certain objects to find their way onto and around human bodies, and their propensity to transition between public and private (domestic) spaces. In sum, it argues that the domestic is apt for various spacings of the geopolitical and militarised.



The paper explores two empirical sites: the military airshow and the home. Drawing firstly on ethnographic research at a number of the UKs military airshows attended between 2010 and 2016, it will account primarily for the *ephemeral*, and the extent to which experiential, haptic experiences are built into cultures of military recruitment. Secondly it draws on a personal, autoethnographic account of *ephemera* and the propensity for certain objects to find their way onto or around the body, and to travel from the airshow back home. The use of auto/ethnography in this paper framed by recent work on CMS-as-method. Central to this literature is the claim that “dominant ideas about militaries, what they are for, and how they should work, are so often de-personalized in that they are removed from the level of people and their everyday interactions” (Baker et al. 2016, 142). In turn, this paper is evidence for a broader attempt to locate militarism “amidst the people and places it affects...[i.e. the] everyday, local and personal” (Rech et al. 2015, 57). Auto/ethnography is used here, specifically, to provide an insight into how seemingly mundane, insignificant objects and senses come to matter. But it is also used to integrate both research participants (the prospective military recruit) *and* the researcher more fully into the scholarly account. Where critical studies of the military (and indeed any sort of critical scholarly work) may seem as being “sealed off in another time and place” (Baker et al. 2016, 142) after research notes are written, after a paper is published, a material auto/ethnography is deployed here in order to trace militarism as its affects echo beyond the research ‘event’ (in this case a series of airshows). As detailed below, ephemera is central to this story due to its tendency to linger, accumulate, to become symbolic and/or useful, or to ‘act’ unpredictably.

### **The Ephemeral: Static, In-Situ Stuff**

Military airshows happen between May and September in the UK and are used by all three branches of the British Armed Forces for the purposes of recruitment. They take place both on military airbases as ticketed events, and in range of public spaces, particularly on sea fronts like at Bournemouth (see Friend 2015). Though the link between airshows and eventual enlistment is unproven (Prine 2014), there is no doubt that the British military and others privilege these sorts of events, fiscally at least, as opportunities for purposeful public relations. Airshows therefore arguably play a role in what Everett (2013) argues is the defining character of militarism in the UK: a ‘sowing of seeds’, or a constant, low-level habituation to the military throughout the lifecourse manifest as/at commemorative or sporting events, country fairs, or state occasions. In and of themselves, airshows therefore act doubly. They provide an imaginary of what the military is and does, but also act as an element in a wider, militarised landscape and aesthetic. Thus, whilst allowing

potential enlistees to interact with recruiters, they perhaps more importantly comprise a series of encounters which provoke a more profound, embodied sense-making.

In addition to a programme of flypasts and aerobatics by military and civilian aircraft, which may be conceived as (geo)political in their own right (Rech 2015), the showground at events like that in Sunderland (Figure 1) is commonly filled with real and/or facsimile aircraft which serve as ‘walk-on’ attractions. After having queued, parents and their children may be guided by Royal Air Force personnel onto a Sea King helicopter, for example, and allowed to sit in the pilot’s seat and to press buttons and move levers. Showgoers might be given the opportunity to pick their way through a mock minefield with help from the British Army’s Corps of Engineers. A staple activity at the airshow is the opportunity to try on military uniform or combat apparel, to be strapped into an ejector set or act as the casualty in an olive-green Army ambulance and be summarily strapped to a stretcher. Airshows also allow for a range of encounters with ‘weaponised’ objects, more of which below.

There are a number of possible interpretations of this ‘static’ stuff; the objects which remain in-situ which are either designed for or used as promotional tools by recruiters. First, the objects available to the potential recruit might be said to merely tell a story of the respective branch, squadron or regiment being advertised. A common strategy at the show is for recruiters to lay out a range of objects on a table related to their particular role (Figure 2): a sniper rifle is representative of the RAF Regiment; a Meccano set might illustrate the job of the RAF’s Trade Group 4 (electrical and mechanical



Figure 1. Sea king at Sunderland (Author).



**Figure 2.** Table of stuff: Sunderland airshow (Author).

technicians), for example. Here, the different roles available to the recruit are differentiated, and moreover, grounded in differently tactile experiences. Differently, recruiters also deploy touch screens at airshows which run programs to test a specific skill attribute; a prospective Intelligence Officer will be presented with a problem-solving app, an Army Infantryman a more familiar point-and-shoot. The prevalence of in-situ engagements with screens (see also Allen 2009) is indicative of a wider shift in recruiting for Western militaries and for a growing preference for candidates who are skilled with electronic and online gaming.<sup>2</sup> The forging of connections here between military role, object and potential recruit also has wider significance for subject formation. Where a standard account might suggest that military subject formation begins after enrolment, during basic training, or after the recruit is ‘sorted’ into regiment, squadron or unit, contemporary recruiting practices allow for a much earlier, though provisional socialisation. Crucial in these instances are ephemeral, tactile encounters which allow the potential recruit not only to imagine themselves in a role, but an opportunity to sense and embody certain military subjectivities. Such a process is, again, of undoubted practical beneficial to the recruiter, who oversees the alignment of bodily capacities and predilections with certain military roles.

Remaining with a critique of gaming and touch screens is useful for interrogating the ‘stuff’ of recruitment at the airshow, at least if we take this stuff as merely indicative of respective branches. Namely, by removing objects from their contexts of use (i.e. from the battlefield), or reproducing the job of a pilot as a simple, touch-screen interaction, is also to “subordinate critical and ethical questions” (Stahl 2010, 110), and to dislocate objects from

wider assemblages of warfighting. A mortar round, for example, handled idly by a passer-by at a recruiting stall, tells us very little of violence it is intended to inflict. And neither does a touch-screen game about intelligence gathering inform the showgoer about what intelligence is used for, or the means by which it is gathered.

However, a perhaps more useful interpretation of the stuff of recruitment is a one that foregrounds the material-discursive, along with the politics of perception. As noted, airshows provide visitors the opportunity to handle weaponised objects – rifles, mock or deactivated grenades, ordnance, etc. – and objects which speak of the violence of conflict, such as kevlar body armour or a tourniquet. One strategy used by all three branches of the military (the Navy's Royal Marines in [Figure 3](#)) is to present to showgoers a table of small-arms (rifles, pistols, deactivated enemy AK47s and RPGs). Engaged with most often by excited children, the handling of these weapons is supervised by military personnel who advise on how to correctly operate the cocking mechanism, to eject or insert the magazine, or to disable the safety catch in order to depress the trigger. These technical prompts can be read simply and as explanatory: coming into contact with a weapon, one is provided a sense of functionality. However, and more importantly, these prompts are illustrative of particular geographical and moral landscapes, whereby and engagement with an object is a materialisation of enemies and allies, and dangerous, threatening places.

In observing a young boy pick up an RPG launcher wrongly at a stall at Sunderland airshow, for example, the supervising soldier was heard to remark: “No, no, no. You hold it like this. *This* is the business end”.



**Figure 3.** This is the business-end: Sunderland (Author).



Similarly, but connoting more clearly the moral prerogative of recruiters, on inadvertently aiming a weapon at personnel, a research companion of mine was told: “Don’t aim at me! I’m you ally”. Thus, much like the range of objects listed above, their respective experiences can be read as straightforward illustrations of use and utility. The job of the recruiter is, here, to supervise a sensory connection-making between the military and the tools it uses. But, further to the insinuation of ‘enemies’ and allies’, experiences like these are often enrolled into wider geographical imaginaries. Upon feeling the discomfort of a flak jacket and bergen (packed with lead to simulate laden weight), for instance, one showgoer was told that such apparel was required to defend against IEDs in Afghanistan. In addition, the RAF NCO recruiter in attendance noted that this weight must be imagined “at fifty degrees Celsius in the desert”. In an extension of Tidy’s (2015) work, food is also cast as geopolitical and militarised: at a ‘cook-off’ event at the Sunderland airshow, a Royal Marine demonstrated the preparation of a noodle dish of a kind that one might need to “face the Taliban”.

Summarily, insofar as each example here is being ‘framed’ by a recruiter as geopolitically significant, they are suggestive of Barad’s (2003, 823) understanding of material-discursive encounters. As she notes:

Material conditions matter, not because they “support” particular discourses that are the actual generative factors in the formation of bodies but rather because *matter comes to matter* through iterative interactivity of the world in its becoming. [What matters are the] conjoined material-discursive nature of constraints, conditions and practices.

Thus, whilst taking seriously the discursive prompts from recruiters regarding enemies and allies, and dangerous, threatening places, what matters are the iterative encounters between bodies, things and discourse. This of course points to a radically different and potentially more persuasive mode of cognisance than might be achieved in conventional (print- or screen-based) recruiting. It suggests that ordinary and ordinary sensations – the texture of hessian, the smell of life raft rubber or aviation fuel, the temperature of gun metal – are cast as worldly, and militarily and geopolitically significant. Airshows, therefore, not only afford an abstract, discursive understanding of what the military does and its theatres of operation, but a more fundamental, visceral sense-making. Here, drawing on Anderson and Wylie (Anderson and Wylie 2009, 324), the matter of the airshow might be considered:

primarily in terms of the array of our embedded concerns, as a matter of engaged perception...[which is] an incorporation of matter in to the connective tissues and affective planes of a body subject whose ambit is involvement and engagement.

Importantly, sense-making of this sort is no less central to the production of geographical imaginaries, and importantly for the recruiter, belief and

behaviour. As Anderson and Tolia-Kelly (2004, 671) note, everyday experiences with things can “therefore be creative of both new modes of conduct... and forms of political consciousness”. Further, an engagement with a weapon, a jacket, bergen or 81mm HE mortar round suggests a “sensing towards the world that implicates the body in a worlding that re-organizes conceptions of space and time” (Manning 2007: xiii). And as noted, the ‘framing’ of such objects by recruiters as militarily significant, along with the wider atmosphere of the airshow, is potentially generative of “relations of exteriority, connectivity and exclusion” (Barad 2003, 818) – concepts which map neatly onto notions of friend and foe, of Other(s) and dangerous spaces.

A preliminary conclusion we can draw from a discussion of ‘static’, in situ stuff at the airshow is the determinacy of immediate space. Taken to mean the setting for interactions between bodies and things, the airshow acts in two, seemingly contradictory ways. First, it acts to decontextualize objects – to remove them from spaces of battle – in order that a range of ethical questions about their use might be avoided. Second, the ‘framing’ of experiences with things by recruiters as geographically significant *re*-places objects in the imagined landscapes of Western military endeavour. In both cases, ephemeral interactions with objects and haptic, olfactory and (in fewer cases) gustatory experiences indicate a reciprocal relationship between bodily experience and often global geopolitical imaginaries.

Yet, in remaining at the airshow, we risk limiting our reading of the material cultures of recruitment and its spatialities. In addition to the static, in-situ stuff discussed above, the airshow experience also comprises interactions with less substantial, ‘mobile’ objects – ephemera – which make their way onto or around the body at the airshow, and which often travel home. Following Miller (2005, 19), these sorts of objects represent a different ‘register’ of materiality (at least as opposed to more substantial objects like weapons or military vehicles). The task in the following section is to account for the ephemeral geopolitics of militarism in domestic spaces, but also for the capacity for objects to move across and be affective in different material domains.

### **Ephemera: Mobile Stuff**

In addition to ‘static’ objects designed or used for recruitment, then, the airshow and subsequent spaces enable an engagement with a range of ‘mobile’ ephemera: stuff that can be bought or which is free (handed out by recruiters or other personnel, or picked up by showgoers from presentation tables), and which, importantly, can be carried home. Airshow programmes are ubiquitous and provide a schedule of the day’s flights, venue maps, sponsor messages and advertising, and are often handed out in branded carrier bags alongside other documents – leaflets for local businesses, or vouchers etc. Aircraft checklists and

other paper-based items allow aviation fans a more direct engagement in line with 'acquisitive' visualities (Rech 2015). Such items are accompanied by a plethora of promotional objects – lanyards, pens and pencils, keyrings, golf tees, novelty toys etc. (Figure 4). Central to the capacities of such objects is their mobility. Before a fuller account of this capacity, an initial discussion of 'mobile' stuff must, however, focus on the general significance of a culture of acquisition in the space of the show itself.

The acquisition of promotional objects at the airshow is, like an engagement with the in-situ experiences, the *normative* mode of being showgoer. Acquisition is promoted by recruiters, by companies like Breitling or Fujitsu, and aerospace and arms companies like QinetiQ, BAE Systems or Raytheon who offer 'goody bags' filled with branded objects. Children are encouraged to have their faces painted in green camouflage colours and are seen playing with inflatable RAF Red Arrow toy jets. Children and adults alike leave the show carrying Lockheed Martin draw-string bags, wearing Avro Vulcan-inspired sun visors, or with their clothes covered in stickers bearing RAF squadron insignia or recruiting slogans. Thus, the performance of consumption and the



**Figure 4.** Boxes of things: Sunderland airshow (Author).

making-mobile of certain symbols printed on stickers, bracelets, shoes, umbrellas etc., serves to affirm normative markers of showgoer identity. As work by Lewis (2009) suggests, which considered airshow cultures in the American mid-West, standards around performances of gender and sexuality at airshows can often be inwardly policed, with individuals in the gathered crowds militating against ‘subversive’ identities or performances. Similarly, airshows in the UK afford a narrow range of cultural performances linked to the strictures of consumptive practices. To *not* consume in expected ways, importantly, is therefore to mark oneself outside of the norm.

The more specific character of consumption at the airshow is significant for two reasons. First, much as with the dislocation of weaponised objects from spaces of battle, airshows offer simple (and unsurprisingly celebratory) visions of military life and culture and subject positions. The highly popular ‘Future Pilot’ stickers handed out by the RAF (Figure 5), eagerly collected by younger showgoers, for example, represent a simple interpretation of both the role of the pilot *and* of the identity and aspirations of its wearer. Such objects are crucial to the practice of recruitment where performances of consumption and subsequent uses of objects are ‘imprinted’ by recruiters in ways that align with accepted narratives. As Maycroft’s work (2004, 714) suggests, commodity capitalism produces a ‘vacuum of meaning’ inherently as part of the social relations of consumption. Such a vacuum is filled with a fetish for the commodity, and negation of the relations of production. Similarly, in the rush to consume at the airshow and to act and behave normatively as a showgoer-consumer, the ‘meaning’ of the military, of its geographies and moralities, and more abstract notions like military masculinities, are ‘filled in’ by recruiters and wider stakeholders.<sup>3</sup> Thus, to be a Future Pilot and to brand yourself and perform as such, becomes but one of innumerable moments of consumption sanitised and emptied of the possibility for alternative meaning-making.

Secondly, the character of consumption at the airshow matters because, for the most part, the objects acquired at the airshow are *functional* and have the capacity to become useful. As noted, showgoers are able to acquire a range of objects – pens, lanyards, mouse mats etc. – which have function in addition to the symbolic, and which imply a usefulness beyond their role in performances of consumption. Interpreted simply, the use of these sorts of objects might speak to a wish for the military to be seen, respectively, as a functional and practical institution. Following Miller (2005), objects have the potential to give institutions fixity and solidity, whereby the object is claimed as evidence for certain ideas and principles. Moreover, an institution may claim the object ‘an instrument in its own self-creation’ (Miller 2005, 18). Thus, alongside the distribution of objects with relevant insignia, these objects matter because they are of the *appropriate form*: a Royal Navy keychain, for example (Figure 6), being sturdy and oversize, gives the impression of practicability in turn.





**Figure 5.** Future pilot stickers (Collected at various airshows).

Yet, inherent to the functionality this ephemera is, crucially, mobility, and the ability for such objects to become useful *beyond* the airshow: an RAF pen affords the ability to write; a branded keyring holds keys; a Eurofighter Typhoon poster may be tacked to a bedroom wall. The mobility of these objects and their insinuation into everyday lives and spaces is important, not least because it is symptomatic of contemporary, multi-platform recruiting. Methodologically speaking, tracing the mobility of ephemera in and through research is also an attempt to understand how encounters with the military “spill over beyond the official time and place where they are ‘conducted’” (Baker et al. 2016, 142) (in this case, the military airshow, and into domestic spaces). To elucidate some of these object-mobilities, I draw on my own experience as a critical military researcher through a brief auto-ethnographic discussion. In doing so, I outline the propensity for the ephemera of



**Figure 6.** Various objects collected at airshows.

recruitment to accumulate in my home and workspace, to become useful, immaterial, and to *act* in a variety of ways.

Aside from my engagements with in-situ objects at the airshows I visited, I felt it imperative to collect mundane, mobile objects as often as was possible. From recruiting pamphlets and documents, posters, badges, pens, pencils and key rings, mousemats, lanyards, golf-tees, bags, blank RAF-branded diaries, the materials available at the show presented a way of consuming in a way, I thought, that would be academically productive. These objects, when I got them home, or to work, would be spread out on a desk and interrogated for clues as to how military recruitment worked. An item which I'd never seen before, simply because it was new and different to all my other collected items, would be especially helpful I thought as I got down to the business of thinking about the military. The airshow thus acted to disassociate the act of consumption from the trickier business of interpretation. Consumption (which as we have seen, carries with it a set of predilections towards specific ideas of the military), therefore remained separate from more considered reflection on what these objects did as part of, and as a result of, their acquisition.

This is not to say, however, in my collecting of ephemera I was critically disengaged. I was quite aware, for example, of the troubling irony of a Lockheed Martin googly-eye toy (Figure 6), or the enthusiasm with which some showgoers

engaged with some in-situ, weaponised objects. Similarly, the broader culture of the airshow was immediately unnerving to me: these events allow for an open valorisation of the military, inherent to which is an unquestioned co-presence of military and big business (cosmetics brands, jewellers, arms companies)(see Rech 2015). Nevertheless, despite these issues, the variety of objects which accumulated in my home and work space had a propensity to remain visible and used. This was due to, first, the ability for objects to evoke memory.

In all but one case, my airshow visits were family days-out, and more importantly, family days-out that the exhibition of posters, or the use of particular airshow objects remind me. In being present in a symbolic way, these types of objects (through some of their inherent functionalities as objects to be seen, put up, and displayed) thus act not only as objects of analysis and critique, but as evocative objects; reminders of the experience of time with family. In acting so, it might be argued that objects *do* something outside the object's primary 'utility', regardless of the formal attitude the owner might have towards it (i.e. my essentially critical attitude).

And the propensity for airshow objects to accumulate in spaces visible to me extended also to their ability to get used, wear out, and generally to become part of everyday life. For example, on my home desk, there is a mousemat modelled after an RAF roundel (despite the absence of a mouse); although having exhausted the ink in one of my RAF pens at work, I have one-and-a-half remaining RAF pencils; whilst the RAF diary I acquired went unused and is filed away, my out-of-date RAF calendar (which remains unopened through lack of any fixing-point at my desk) serves as a good poster. Although the details of how these promotional objects are and have been used, have worn out or become non-functional might go on into more detail yet, the essential point is that these objects have come to matter in my day-to-day, have punctuated various work or domestic patterns, and are generative of work and sociality.

Specifically, these objects, as much as I have spoken about *them* in my work, have *spoken about me*. Part of my collection of military promotional objects collection was once displayed and used at work (in shared postgraduate and then post-doctoral offices). Being inherently useful (a military-branded pen can be used for writing when there is no other pen available, regardless of its emblem), this also stemmed from wanting to surround myself with relevant 'stuff', and asserting myself as a military researcher. In doing so, these objects often prompted interest from colleagues who often asked: 'so are you interested in going into the military after you complete?'. More generally, I found that the ephemera in and around my workspace put into question my relationship to the military. In this sense, objects might be generative of presumed relationships between the owner and the producer of the object. But just as my collected ephemera have said something about me as a military researcher, objects which come to matter to the potential recruit might say something about them.

The ability for certain objects to disclose meaning about their owner's identity is significant, as implied here, where they provoke questions of positionality and ethics. In my case, a more direct example of this arose during the Association of American Geographers annual meeting in 2011 – speaking to the theme of airshows and visibility – I couldn't escape the irony of finding myself sitting on a panel taking notes with a BAE Systems pen (collected at the Waddington airshow, and taken with me to the conference hurriedly). Presenting in a session entitled '*Military Violence and Militarisation: Conversations in the Conflict Zone*', more than ironic, it was almost annoying that an object connected to an institution and a discourse of power which my work attempts to be critical of – through its obstinacy, ordinariness and power to accumulate and become useful – might somehow belie an uncritical affiliation of mine, or denote an affection for the military and militarism.

This significance of this episode, and the more general issue of the ephemera of militarism, may be posed in the form of a question: how might 'little things' (Thrift 2000) like pens, posters, flags, and keyrings which accumulate in the critical military researcher's domestic and work space enable a more reflexive and responsible approach to the 'big things' (MacDonald in Jones and Sage 2010) like the military, state-sanctioned violence and war? Although certain objects might 'say' things, symbolically, about the military researcher (as my BAE pen might have said about me), fundamental to the task is understanding that objects can become 'active parties in the making of social collectivities and political associations' (Braun and Whatmore 2010: xiv). The task is at once empirical and epistemological: is about taking seriously matter, objects and things as they work in and through political and militarised cultures, about continuing to extend the conceptual remit of critical geopolitical and military scholarship so as it might account for things that sometimes seem immaterial. The task and responsibility of geopolitical analysis, then, should not only be one of challenging *normativity* (Megoran 2008) but one of challenging *normalness*. For, as it has been shown here, the very normalness of things is powerful as it comes to materialise in popular military cultures, and even through 'critical' scholarly work.

## Conclusion

This paper set out to attend to three interrelated points of debate. First, it aimed to demonstrate how a focus on materiality, on objects, 'stuff', the ephemeral and ephemera aids us in understanding the connection between geopolitics and militarism. It should not be a surprise that military recruiting, like a wide range of popular cultural media and experiences, reproduce familiar geopolitical stories about far off places and peoples, military masculinities, and myths of straightforward and surgical war. Yet, what a focus on materiality affords is an understanding of the *means by which* and *spaces in*



*which* these and other familiar fictions are (re)produced, sensed, and where they come to matter. In this respect, an emphasis in critical geopolitics on everyday spaces and lives must be pursued, building on the efforts of scholars both within and beyond the sub-field. That being said, reporting on and researching everyday spaces and lives as they are affected and shaped by military recruiting specifically is becoming a more difficult task where, as Jauregui (2015) describes, the role of the military recruiter is morphing into a range of other social functions, such as community liaison. Similarly, this task is compounded by the diversification and intensification of military media initiatives which blur the lines between PR, recruitment, and reportage (see Jackson et al. 2017).

Insofar as there *are* still recruiting campaigns that are relatively distinct from wider military media initiatives, a crucial line of inquiry is how recruitment is a product of, and helps to reproduce, a wider, endemic, ‘low level’ popular militarisation and geopolitics. Namely, we must seek to understand how military recruitment leverages the convenient stories of peoples, places and identities which animate public discourse around the military, and furthermore, where these stories begin to shape lives as well as imaginations. A focus on the materiality of recruitment, however, is a provocation to pose these questions not in the abstract – as a matter just of discourse or representation – but at the level of sensation, engaged perception, and encounters with objects. Following Miller (1998, 12), the geopolitics of militarism should therefore be about asking “what people do, and in particular do with things”. Amid this potential multiplicity, a focus on the ‘stuff’ of recruitment it is also a provocation to question the neatness (Baker et al. 2016) of the stories scholars tell about geopolitics and militarism. As Basham and Bulmer (2017, 66) note, a critical military approach should be one that is “vigilant [of] attempts to make familiar concepts ‘fit’ where they simply do not and [about] recognising complexity”. In turn, a focus on objects and materiality, on encounters with the military (after Baker et al. 2016), should be one that embraces the possibility for new, surprising or alternative uses of/ for things, and so for novel readings of the stories of militarised peoples, places and identities.

Second, the paper offered recruitment as a way to understand the ‘geopolitical social’. Military recruitment is a practice which purposefully targets working class communities (e.g. Rech 2016). Because of national attitudes towards the service of women, LGBTQ and minority individuals, it also discriminates along lines of gender, sexuality, race, and (notwithstanding the possibility for the multiple, complex ways the public might engage with the persuasive ephemera of recruitment) reproduces assumptions about masculinity, femininity and the family. It also distinguishes between under- and over-size bodies through the British military’s use of BMI to dis/qualify potential recruits (for a discussion of the significance and spatialities BMI see

Evans and Colls 2009, and for its application in recruitment specifically; Rech 2016). Thus, military recruitment is a practice deeply implicated in and riven by received social norms, but which is also tied to dominant geopolitical scripts. It is a space of synergy between personal and political, global and intimate, where bodily capacities are matched to strategic narratives, and where military power comes to be understood as much through sensation, touch and experience as it is discourse.

Amongst the many directions for a material understanding of the geopolitical social of recruitment and/or popular militarisation, we might draw upon Müller's (2012) vision of social-material ordering. Here, the synergy of geopolitical and social may be located in the multifarious ensemble of human and material elements that make up the organisation of contemporary military public relations. Military recruitment and, increasingly, military community relations directives are a vast amalgam of people, texts, knowledges and creative practices. The procurement of people for Western militaries and the management of perception involves governmental bills and policymaking, inspectorates, advertising and creative agencies, private sector research consultancies, recruiting offices on high streets, innumerable things (posters, pamphlets, careers websites, branded pencils and lanyards) – and the potential recruit themselves. Stabilizing the links between these different elements of a human and non-human ensemble would, after Müller (2012), go somewhere to making such ensembles visible *as* a synergy of geopolitical and social.

Closer to the aspirations of this paper, however, the geopolitical social of military recruitment might well be investigated through a closer reading of the embodied, micro-geographies of promotion. As McSorley's (2014, 119) work demonstrates, support for the global activities of war and war preparedness can be rooted in a:

pervasive militarisation of the body that operates across multiple constituencies and domains of everyday life, from fashion to diet to leisure and fitness, and that often resonates with wider pacific, neo-liberal discourses of self-actualisation, thrill and body image.

Insofar as these discourses imply a range of social geographies – class, body size, spaces of leisure etc. – more might be done to explore how the geopolitics of recruitment is manifest as a 'body project' and an 'auto-militarisation' (McSorley 2016). As discussed above, however, such a focus would require detailed study of both the ephemera and ephemeral of recruitment, and a narration of things-in-themselves.

Lastly, the paper sought to prompt reflection, via various conceptual and empirical detours, on the domestication of geopolitics directly. Specifically, it investigated the tendency for certain objects to find their way onto and around human bodies, and their propensity to transition between public

and private (domestic) spaces. Military recruitment is a practice which purposefully deploys ephemera to facilitate the mobility of affects and objects between promotional spaces like the airshow, and intimate spaces like the home and body. The mobility of persuasive objects is, in a contemporary culture of multi-platform recruiting, arguably *integral* to the military recruiters' geopolitical story-telling. Thus, conceiving of the domestication of geopolitics as ephemeral, and as about ephemera, enables a fuller appreciation of connections between often global narratives of military endeavour, and intimacies of everyday life.

Methodologically, a material auto/ethnography, one that follows objects on their own terms, also reveals the 'spilling over' of encounters with the military from discreet times and spaces to, in this case, everyday routines and home-spaces. Whilst illustrating something important to us about the experience of the potential recruit, this prompts reflection on the value of methodological approaches that might capture different registers of militarism, ones that escape traditional epistemological confines. It also suggests we take seriously our *own* militarisation (e.g. Rech et al. 2016), along with the 'stuff' that often surrounds us as engaged scholars, or the sensate encounters that echo long after research notes are written, or a paper published. Taken together, is it clear that ephemera and the ephemeral are precisely the things that 'work with, alongside, and in-between the performances and spaces of power' (Meehan, Shaw, and Marston 2013, 2). The *domestication* of geopolitics should therefore mean taking the spaces in which material encounters unfold, or which are animated by otherwise insignificant objects, as no less entwined with the business of geopolitics and militarism.

## Notes

1. Object Lessons is a popular book and essay series which allows contributors to 'develop original insights around and novel insights about [a chosen] object'. Spanning anthropology, ecology, archeology, history, literature, STS and many other disciplines, each lesson involves a close, fine-grained analysis of (usually) single objects and the framing of such objects by a variety of conceptual traditions. Much like the current article, Object Lessons is committed to unpicking the social, political, cultural and/or economic significance of what often amounts to ephemera, or to exploring how, when and where 'matter comes to matter' (after Barad 2003).
2. A growing preference for recruits into the British military who are skilled gamers is due in part to the increased importance of remote warfare in contemporary military operations, and thus the sorts of tactile skills required for modern computer gaming (see for example Wintour 2016).
3. In large part, received notions of military masculinities and heteronormativity remain unchallenged at airshows in respect of wider discourse (e.g. men as warfighters and women as caregivers). However, this is not to say 'classically' masculine or feminine activities are *engaged* with materially by male and female visitors in expected ways. It is

just as likely that a young girl will be encouraged to pose with a weapon as a young boy, for example, or that this same boy might engage with objects associated with a medical branch (and so with a 'caregiving' role). This is perhaps unsurprising given the recent change in government policy which has opened up close combat roles to women (Farmer 2016). An ephemera(l) approach to militarism, therefore, is a useful opportunity to avoid a 'short-hand' labelling of social behaviors in a way that fits convenient gender narratives (Basham and Bulmer 2017) and to embrace a more nuanced understanding of how gendered military identities are played out situationally. This theme will be returned to in the conclusion.

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